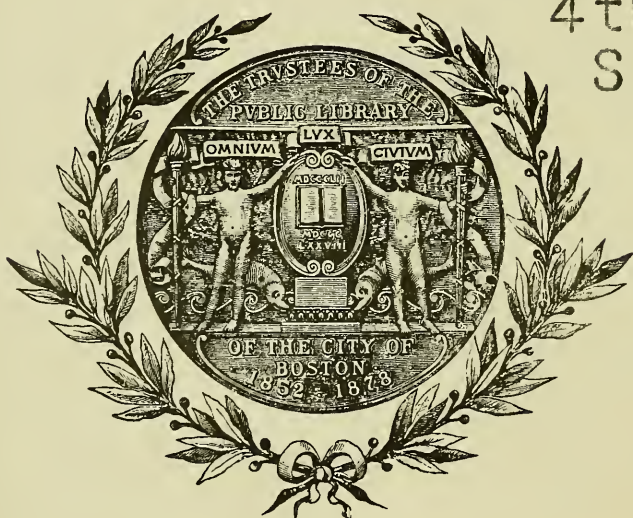


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CHRISTIANITY AND UNITARIANISM.

BY

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BOSTON.*C*

Rev Caleb D. Bradley

July 18. 1893

“The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity ; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.” — ARTICLE I. of the *By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

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CHRISTIANITY AND UNITARIANISM.

WHAT is the central and distinguishing thing in Christianity, or that which makes it differ from other religions? I find its essence in the emphasis it places on man's spiritual kinship to God, and in its simple reliance on the power of divine truth and love to produce in man a character worthy of that kinship. It is the religion of nature and reason better understood, loftily taught and illustrated in a personality, vitalized by the original creative force which we call the Holy Spirit, and continuously transmitted from soul to soul and from age to age.

Christianity comes to me as a deepening and expansion of the light that lighteth every man. If it did not hold much in common with all other religions, if it were a contradiction or blinding of reason, it could have no place in our human world. Taken out of doors, on the mount or by the lake, it is commended to us by its vivid naturalness; it recalls us to the simplicity of the little child, yet opens to us the infinite heavens of wisdom, and puts all the forces and faculties of life in upward motion, simply by addressing us as children of the All-Perfect.

We are partakers of the divine nature; we are children and heirs of God! Is there a higher conceivable interpretation to human life and destiny? Are there higher possible motives, or completer helps to realize that life and destiny? Here shines the light which shows a clear upward path for all humanity. Here glows the love which

overcomes evil with good and allies humanity in spirit and purpose with divinity. Here is disclosed in our souls the only life which is worthy to be immortal; *it is the life of sonship*. Here is the reason of reason, the root of ethics, the secret of order and power, of beauty and joy.

Because this gives the highest conceivable interpretation to human life and destiny, along with the highest motives and completest helps to realize that life and destiny, I must regard pure Christianity — apart from its transient elements and perversions — as not only superior to all other forms of religion, but as inclusive of whatever good they contain, and as competent to take up into itself every measure of truth and excellence which is yet to be given to humanity. I can conceive of no religion higher than that which makes us heirs of all things, and which promotes our endless growth toward the perfection of God.

When I first came among the people called Unitarians, I was naturally interested in finding out wherein they differed from other bodies of Christians. I soon saw that they regarded it as a task laid upon them to recover the religion of Jesus from its corruptions, to distinguish between its transient forms and its enduring life, and to exalt the spirit above the letter. It interested me that James Freeman Clarke had formed a church for the “study and practise of Christianity;” and in the constitution of the American Unitarian Association I read that its object was “to diffuse the knowledge and to promote the interests of pure Christianity,” though every one seemed left perfectly free to define Christianity for himself. Such facts showed the general direction of the movement, but it did not appear that anybody had thought the matter out to full and final conclusions. Some of them seemed brave; others seemed timid. I could see that the timid ones were afraid of going faster than they could be sure

of the road; so that I respected their conservative caution. The movement itself seemed greater than the men; and the meaning of it greater than the words they used.

Another thing gradually became clear: when they used the word Christianity, they did not generally mean a doctrinal system, nor an organized church, — they meant the life of Jesus, the life of sonship to God, continued in the life of humanity; and some of them saw, as Saint Paul and Saint Augustine saw, that his kind of spiritual life was always in the world and was older than the name. Without doing violence to language, and without straining the facts of history, they could properly speak of the inner spirit of Christianity as the absolute and universal religion, appearing in its most exalted form under the inspired and inspiring leadership of the greatest of all the prophets and foremost of all the sons of God. Some of the most honest and earnest men among them were saying, “We must get outside of Christianity in order to reach the truth which Jesus did not teach, and to practise the good he did not enjoin.” But others said, “Christianity has no outside; the spirit of Jesus is the spirit of free progress; in that name we can go on toward perfection forever. Christianity is not bondage and limitation; it is free religion, taking up into itself whatsoever things are true and venerable, pure and just, lovely and of good report, wherever found.” Words and names are not things to stickle for, yet they prove mightily convenient as signs and vehicles of the spirit. But the clearest thinking does not stop at words or names; it penetrates to the realities which no language can adequately represent.

With this large interpretation, there was no need to drop the Christian name; but there was need to charge it with higher and nobler meaning. There was no need to

withhold fellowship from good men who did drop the name; they were Christian in our sense, if not in their own sense. There was no need even to repel an honest and true man who called himself an atheist; for in living by the highest law he, too, was proved a child of God, even though he could not speak his Father's name.

We can therefore unite with the Association in promoting the interests of "pure Christianity" without narrowness, without proscribing anybody, and without making it a matter of fine-spun definitions. The true business is to bring as many people as possible under the influence of wisdom and goodness. All Unitarians could respond heartily to a saying of Dean Stanley: "Nothing greatly concerns us except that we become wiser and better; and that we should become wiser and better is just what Christianity intends."

A few months before his death, I had a happy conversation with Phillips Brooks. We found ourselves entirely agreed on this point: That Christianity was a free, open, unstereotyped, world-wide movement, large enough to take in every advance of light and every good thing that is yet to come to the world; and we also agreed that if Christianity could not fairly bear this inclusive construction, we should both be obliged to go outside, in order to be true to ourselves, to our fellow-men, and to God. From portions of his sermons preached more than a dozen years ago, I know that Phillips Brooks recognized the true Christ in pure-minded pagans who never heard the gospel, even as Peter learned from a vision that "in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of him."

We belong to the Church of Christ as we belong to the republic of Washington and Lincoln, and are as little trammelled by the first form of Christian teaching as by the utterances and actions of these great patriots and

statesmen. Our liberty is not impaired or restricted, but preserved and extended, by the inspiring name of Jesus. In that name we resent and resist all forms of spiritual servility, and all impositions of authority which would bid us call any man master. In emancipating mankind from every yoke save the yoke of truth and goodness, he simply bids us share with himself that higher liberty of the sons of God which is the proper birthright of all souls. Under any lower interpretation, Christianity brings bondage rather than deliverance, and Jesus adds one more name to the long list of spiritual tyrants.

Did humanity in Jesus rise to the conscious dignity of sonship, or did divinity descend in fatherly love to draw humanity upward? As well ask whether the flower rises to meet the sun, or the sun descends to meet the flower. Enough for us is the union of the human and the divine; enough for us is the doctrine of Immanuel, or "God with us," which Jesus has both taught and illustrated as the natural order of life for all men.

In accepting Jesus as the captain of salvation for all the world, or as the spiritual leader of all we can do or wish to do for the higher welfare of mankind, we simply avail ourselves of a great historic impulse, — an impulse to the natural religious sentiment as vast and vague, and quite as real, as the alphabet or the printing-press has given to the growth of language and literature. We do not separate from the best faith of the Christian world, but we seek to put ourselves in the very middle of that stream of power which has flowed down the ages, and in sympathy with that great human heart which broke on Calvary for love of all souls.

I am not here attempting a complete definition of Christianity or of Unitarianism; but it has seemed worth while to show that the central and vital truth of the

former is precisely the truth which is central and vital to the latter, — that if Christianity is an orderly outcome of Nature and a free movement of spiritual or divine forces in humanity, Unitarianism is simply a free movement of the same kind and in the same direction. Much that goes under the Christian name must be winnowed out and blown away; and the same thing is true of much that goes under the Unitarian name. But the only way to get rid of folly, error, and evil is to let the *life principle* have free course in our hearts and in our churches.

I do not claim for the Unitarians superior intelligence or superior virtue; I do not claim that we have a body of final and verified truth which is destined to displace all other ways of thinking; nor do I claim that the ultimate object of our activity differs greatly from that of other churches and people. We unite with them in the prayer that God's kingdom may come and that his will may be done.

I do not stand here to say that others are all wrong, or that we are all right. The sober fact is that neither they nor we are very wise or very good.

But I do claim one great advantage in our method of dealing with this whole matter of religion: ours is the method of freedom. We have conquered the right of self-correction and improvement, both in our beliefs and in our practices. In theory at least, every member of our churches is as free, in spirit and in conduct, to obey the inward monitor as if no such churches existed. There is nothing in our principles, nothing in our organization — would to God there were nothing in our hearts! — to prevent our instant and joyful response to any good thing that may be or has been said or done in our own time or in foregoing ages. No pressure is upon us to believe or disbelieve, to do or to refrain from doing, except as every one may be fully persuaded in his own

mind. We have no cause for being distracted about a revision of our creed, for every soul of us silently modifies his ways of thinking as the light enters to show him the truth more clearly.

In this freedom we have really found our unity ; for we have moved, amid many differences, toward essential agreement. We need spend no force in resisting or disparaging reason or science, nature or man. We accept all the appointments of the world as divine provisions for education. We find it easy to believe in yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow, without worshipping the god Antiquity or the god Novelty. We have no fear that the true God will contradict himself, if he shall speak again and again ; and we are ready to identify the Word incarnate in humanity with the silent Logos of creation. We have the least possible partisan or ecclesiastical interest to defend ; we covet to be what Dr. Bellows called us, "the unsectarian sect." We are tempted by no powerful bribe of property or standing, and by no silly dread of inconsistency, to put the product of the new vintage into old wine-skins, nor to pretend that we steer our ship by calculations based on old almanacs. We can afford to learn from Rome or England or from our neighbors ; we can afford to profit by criticism, and to mend our manners, our methods, or our principles, with no undue tenderness toward our own errors, follies, or faults.

If these are indeed spiritual advantages, they are all due to the free method, which permits a free movement of free souls in a free church. If we do not live up to it, that is not the fault of the method. But as it is good for us, we believe it would be good for many others, who for want of such a free method and generous fellowship are living in spiritual solitude and sadness.

My view of the present religious situation and of our duty is this : In nearly every city and village, and scat-

tered through all the rural regions, are many tens of thousands of men and women who are not reached, and for various reasons cannot be reached in their deepest nature and need, by the religious influences which proceed from the Romish Church or from the so-called Evangelical preachers, but who can be reached and helped by a more free and rational religious appeal. Without saying one word in criticism, and with hearty recognition of what others are doing, I think we may agree that here is the place and the part assigned to the Unitarians in the wide field of religious work.

Is it worth while for Unitarians to keep up a separate organization, and to plant more churches of their own kind in this country, or anywhere else? There are some who doubt it, — some who say that our mission is substantially accomplished, that the progress of free inquiry and the spirit of wider fellowship have brought the older and larger churches into such a degree of harmony with the higher and more rational interpretation of Christianity that we may now safely be mustered out of separate service.

For my part, I would gladly take this view, if it were true. It is a life-trial and a settled grief to be outside the great warm fellowship of Christendom, and to be obliged to protest against the creeds which are taught in the name of the Lord. Multitudes are rejoicing over the softening of the old sectarian animosities and the approach of all the churches toward harmony and good feeling; but we are still very far from being of one fold and one shepherd. Quite as serious is the fact that the great body, the vast majority, of the hundred thousand pulpits in our country are obliged, either by conviction, by the pressure of opinion, or by church standards, to restrict their religious instruction, not within the limits of known truth, but within the limits of what was believed to

be true in former centuries. The Spirit which leads into all truth cannot find full utterance in the pulpit, nor full welcome in the pew, without a breach of ecclesiastical order and a rupture of fellowships. I believe, therefore, that the time has not come when we can safely cease to testify for the full liberty of the sons of God and the right and duty of independent thinking in matters of religion. Every live Unitarian church we can establish will become an object-lesson to the community, illustrating the possibility and holy beauty of uniting "freedom, fellowship, and character in religion."

There is another reason for the planting of Liberal churches, if indeed they shall be composed of faithful people. From two directions, in recent years, clouds have been gathering to darken the intelligence of multitudes. The very fact that every creed is under challenge has made many ministers and people quite willing to evade the questions which the Spirit of Truth is pressing upon the modern mind. In one direction there has been a rapid growth of unenlightened religious sentimentality, which makes a blind use of the Scriptures to prevent clear thinking; while another section of the church takes refuge in external observances, which multiply and multiply, till they are mistaken for religion itself. The rector in a New York church complains "that there is an overwhelming bent toward ritualism, and that thinking is discredited." It is easy to draw people to spectacular and mechanical performances; and a sad facility is afforded for admitting to the ministry men who have no special fitness for that work of religious instruction which Jesus and his apostles made the chief instrument of edification.

To claim for the Unitarian ministry a monopoly of intelligence would be ridiculous arrogance; but certainly our body, small as it is, has ever acted as a counterpoise

to the tendencies of obscurantism, fanaticism, and unthinking religiosity. As a rule, our preachers are teachers; they believe in divine wisdom; they make of every congregation a school of thoughtful people, as well as a company of worshippers; nor can we ever get far away from the idea that one *must* be thoughtful in order to worship the Father "in spirit and in truth." I think there is need of many more churches in which the people feel themselves called to meditate deeply and freely upon all things that pertain to the kingdom of God and the welfare of man. And I think the people who listened lovingly to the preacher of Galilee were put in such a state of mind that they wanted to know whatever could be learned about all things in heaven and earth.

The scope of religious instruction among us being widened so as to include all the relations of sound knowledge to good living, and the free play of public spirit being encouraged by our caring more for mankind than for the sect, our churches have produced an extraordinary number of men and women who have taken a leading part in public affairs, in education, philanthropy, and literature. Prominent Episcopalians and Presbyterians in Philadelphia—a city of five or six hundred churches—have more than once told me that the three Unitarian congregations of that city furnished a large part of the most competent and reliable supporters of every general movement for reform and improvement. The same thing is true here in Massachusetts, and it is said to be true in England. This must be set to the credit of the free method in religion.

The Unitarian kind of spiritual culture therefore tends to produce an increased activity of the human mind, and to direct that activity toward all worthy subjects of thought. We are not alone in this; but probably it is more emphasized and urged among us than by any other section of the Christian Church.

Quite in a line with this habit of appealing to the reason of mankind is the use we make of printed matter, especially through the Post Office Mission, which carries on an extensive correspondence with individual inquirers scattered through all the States and Territories. This opens the door for travelling preachers; and these prepare the ground for permanent societies.

But the progress of intelligence is opening many such doors, and the demand for preachers of a faith at once reasonable and reverent is far in advance of the supply. The newly gathered congregations have generally a small membership with small means, and they need encouragement. Some of them fail by adopting building plans that are too ambitious; some because they cannot find suitable ministers; some because the religious interest is shallow and short-lived. But some of them succeed, and become a permanent power and blessing. This mixture of failure and success in church-planting runs all the way back to the days of the apostles; and then, as now, the strong helped the weak, and the faithful contributed the means to enable the preachers to give themselves to the work. It was a work of faith and a labor of love, all around.

We are obliged to ask whether this kind of labor and outlay is not largely thrown away. Every church has to ask that question; every preacher has to ask it. For one, I always find the answer in the parable of the sower. A part of the seed fell on stony places, a part by the wayside, a part among thorns; and all this was wasted, — it came to nothing. But *some* seed fell upon good ground and brought forth fruit. Not all of this was equally fruitful; some brought forth thirty fold, some sixty, some an hundred.

It is so with our missionary work; much of it yields no adequate results. It is so with what we try to do in

our own churches and pulpits. And is it not the same in every department of activity, — in education, in charity, in business? To bring even a little to pass, we must attempt much. Theodore Parker thought that if he really reached and helped five in a thousand of his hearers, it was worth while to preach. Jesus must often have felt that only a few of the multitude understood and accepted his message; and it is likely that this parable of the sower was born of a bitter-sweet experience. The bitter part was that so many of his gracious words fell on idle ears; the sweet part was that *some* seed fell on good ground and brought forth fruit. And so he kept sowing, as his faithful followers have done ever since, with the same discouragements, the same moderate success, the same sure harvest.

We do not shut up the schools, nor abandon social reforms, nor go out of business because the results are not all we wish. In these fields of effort we simply sow more bountifully, as if to make up for the losses.

When we try to do good to mankind, the failures are often due to our own mistakes, to our lack of judgment or our lack of earnestness. Preacher-work and church-work belong to the highest form of skilled labor; but neither ministers nor parishes have wholly learned their business. And when we send new men to new fields, to win souls and build up societies, will it be strange if some false motions are made, and if some promising beginnings come to naught? Even where we succeed, will it be strange if the success is often quite moderate, and the increase even less than thirty-fold? All the more must we sow bountifully.

How often during our great war, when defeats were mingled with victories, and the victories also were gained at such frightful cost, our hearts were ready to sink! It seemed at times as if there could be no possible com-

pensation for the sacrifice of so many precious lives, a sacrifice which in many cases seemed cruelly needless. The pain of it, the woe of it, is still like a shadow in many thousands of hearts and homes. But when we think what a long dark night would have set in upon this continent had the Slave-Power succeeded, who will not say that Liberty and Union are worth all they cost, worth every drop of blood so freely given, worth every pang in the hearts of mothers and wives?

Let us say the same about the setbacks and discouragements which are incident to the promotion of pure Christianity. They are very real, and often they are very sad, and in many cases they appear to be the result of human blindness and folly. But they are like eddies in a strong stream, and the stream still runs on, and is a river of divine benefits to mankind. We are the sharers of such benefits; they have come down to us from former generations, through the lives and services of men who were unwise and faulty, like ourselves, but who, like ourselves, had something besides faults, and often builded even better than they knew.

We must work on long lines, and with a wise forecast. By the end of the thirtieth century there will have lived and died in the United States a population four times as large as the number now living on the globe. We are not working merely for the sixty-five millions who are living here in our own time; we are called to be benefactors and ministers of grace to all those billions of people that are yet to dwell between these great oceans,—to those throngs and crowds of men and women who will never know that we have lived, but who will have human hearts and spiritual needs like our own, and whose happiness and welfare, like ours, must depend on their living here in harmony with each other and with the holy laws. And what we do, or fail to do, must affect both their physical and

social welfare, along with those higher interests which are vast as eternity.

But to work on long lines only means that we shall keep doing the best things that are now possible. That great Teacher whose heart was large enough to take in all the ages and races of men, did not lose his opportunity to talk with one poor unknown woman, chance-met by a well; he did not think it a small matter to preach to fishermen by the lake, or to go about the country villages, brightening and cheering the lives of common people. We, too, can work within narrow limits and with small means, and yet work for that which is boundless and immortal.

Even now, in America, there is a vast population "out in search of religion." Not half the people who are dwelling in this land have any settled religious faith or purpose. Not half are gathered into churches, and of those in the churches not half are walking in the light and resting in the love of God. It is not enough to collect the sheep and lambs in the fold; the Good Shepherd requires that they be properly fed.

There are millions of uninstructed and uninspired souls living in moral twilight. There are millions who have hardly been told the glad tidings that they belong to that spiritual family, in earth and heaven, of which Eternal Goodness is the head. There are populous communities where no adequate provision is made for bringing the people together in the name of the Fatherhood and the Brotherhood. Just so long as any part of the human race is thus dwelling in darkness, the children of the light must see in missionary work their holy duty and their happy privilege.

We, like our brethren of other names, are in danger of doing an inferior kind of religious work. The name Unitarianism, like the name Christianity, may be used

to cover most unspiritual and misleading teaching. Dr. Dewey thought there might be something going on under the Unitarian name for which mankind ought to have no respect, and to which they should show no favor. I think we must always be more concerned for the quality of our work than for the quantity. The mixture of tares with the wheat in the sowing means mischief in the growing and further mischief in the harvest. "The seed the sower sows grows according to its kind. *Let us sow good seed with care and liberality.*" So exhorts John Ruskin; so exhorted and so acted the prophets and apostles whose harvests the ages have been reaping.

Something can be done to enlighten and uplift mankind, and we can help do it. To a generous mind is not this enough? Let the opportunity appear, and the zeal comes of itself. All a genuine prophet needs is something to say; then he cannot keep silent. All a Christian needs is something to do; then he cannot remain idle. All a living church needs is to see an open door of usefulness, and it moves gladly to the service. Opportunity of itself is what Saint Paul would call "the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." That is, if we have caught the spirit and purpose of the gospel, we shall find ourselves in the company of him who "went about doing good, because God was with him!" That is, he went seeking opportunities, because his heart was full of divine love for mankind.

At the National Conference of 1884, in Saratoga, I heard James Freeman Clarke close an address with these words: "I shall not live to see it; but some day there will certainly be seen a church of the living God and the living Christ, in which earth and heaven shall be one, time and eternity blended in sweet consent. If Unitarians are faithful to the light God is sending them, they will have the blessed opportunity of bringing this king-

dom near; if not, it will be taken from them, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."

I believe that we, too, are looking and longing for the living church, one, Holy, Catholic, and Christian, free and clear of Romish rubbish and Protestant perversion; free of hard bigotry and irrational dogma; free of conservative stupidities and radical flippancies; gladly welcoming the yoke of the higher law and the lowly service; bringing forth out of her treasury things new and old; reconciling the truths of history with the truths of science; coupling stability with progress; blending light with love, reason with reverence, worldly activity with heavenly principles; alive with the enthusiasm of Brotherhood because inspired with the faith of the Fatherhood; and leading the nations onward to the shining Age of Gold, when there shall be none to hurt or destroy, and the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

May the Spirit of Truth enlighten our eyes, enlarge our hearts, and make us ready for every good word and work!

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